DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 254 468 SO 016 266

AUTHOR Sanneh, Lamin
TITLE Source and Influence: A Comparative Approach to African Religion and Culture.
INSTITUTION Harvard Univ., Cambridge, Mass. Graduate School of Education.
SPONS AGENCY Bernard Van Leer Foundation, The Hague (Netherlands).
PUB DATE 22 Jun 84
NOTE 29p.; Paper from the Project on Human Potential. For other project papers, see SO 016 244-270.
PUB TYPE Reports - General (140)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Change; *Christianity; Comparative Analysis; *Cultural Influences; *Islamic Culture; Linguistic Borrowing; *Religion
IDENTIFIERS *Africa; Islam

ABSTRACT

The importance of studying the primary context of the relationship between "source" and "influence" in a comparative science of religion and culture is emphasized throughout this article. Focusing primarily on the situation in Muslim and Christian Africa, the article distinguishes between in-coming "sources" and indigenous "influences." Although it seems reasonable to consider how Christianity and Islam changed Africa, it is more consistent and critical to consider the effects Africa has had on the two religions. The issue of vernacular languages is seen as the key to the process of the transformation of Christianity and Islam in Africa. Comparisons between reactions to the language of the missionary as unsuitable for the expression of religion in African culture and reactions to the intrinsic untranslatability of the Islamic Koran are made. Specific examples drawn from the Akan and Hausa cultures and the Ibo (Nigeria), Wolof (Senegal), Mandika (Mali), and Swahili (Kenya) languages are presented. The paper concludes that (1) if borrowing takes place at all, it is on the basis of an original mutual attraction, (2) depending on the level of such mutual attraction, indigenous criteria act on the incoming materials by domesticating them, and (3) once assimilated, the new materials may act both to judge and justify the earlier materials. A passage from the travels of Sir Richard Burton is used as a concluding example of what African culture can do to foreign cultural materials. (LH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED254468

Source and Influence: A Comparative Approach to African Religion and Culture

Lamin Sanneh

June 22, 1984

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

✓ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Lamin Sanneh

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Papers from the Bernard Van Leer Foundation
Project on Human Potential

SØ 016 366

Gutman Library

Harvard Graduate School of Education
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138

*Not for quotation or reproduction without permission of the authors.

2nd Draft
Lamin Sanneh
6/22/84

Source and Influence: A Comparative Approach to African Religion and Culture

Introduction

The science of comparative studies in general has suffered from the absence of a consistent and coherent theory of how source and influence might be related. In much of the material on the subject we are presented with an uncritical notion that source implies influence, that evidence of borrowing is incriminating proof of superficiality, with the original carrying the force of influence.

I shall consider mainly the situation in Muslim and Christian Africa and try to distinguish between in-coming sources and indigenous influence. The reform tradition in African Islam and the missionary factor in African Christianity will be reassessed in terms of the distinction I am introducing.

This paper sets out to show that Source and Influence are two separate issues, even if they are sometimes closely intertwined. We shall attempt to prove that Source does not necessarily imply Influence nor are similarities evidence of incompleteness.

Definition

Webster's New World Dictionary gives as one of its definitions of influence the power of persons or things to affect others. It says that the word, etymologically meaning 'a flowing in,' was originally applied to the supposed flowing of an ethereal fluid or power from the stars, thought to affect the character and actions of people. Influence was later extended to mean authority or power to command acceptance, belief, obedience based on strength of character, expertness of knowledge or even political or social position. In the world of art and literature influence retained much of its etymological definition, though in religious studies it is the secondary meaning that has come to predominate. For our purposes this secondary meaning of the word should suffice, with the additional idea of a modification of what is thus influenced.

On the word source Webster says it originally meant a spring or fountain as the starting point of a stream, with

the secondary meaning of that from which something comes or develops, a place of origin. In a separate entry it says that source material means original or primary sources of information on any given subject or study. I employ the word here to mean material or an idea whose provenance is other than the context in which it occurs.

In the conventional way of treating the matter, we have normally ascribed to source both the notion of influence and the consequences following from that. Yet it is clear from the Dictionary definition that influence is the force that shapes the source material. It is a 'flowing in' which modifies the fresh material in conformity with the nature of influence. The source material affects this process only as fuel affects combustion.

Applying the Theory

When we apply this understanding to culture and religion a new situation arises. Shakespeare's dependence on historical sources is one example where source is in radical subordination to the influence of the dramatist. The cumulative volume of such sources does not add up to influence. The reverse might be nearer the mark. The influence of the dramatist helped to put fresh vitality into a piece of the past that would otherwise remain inaccessible.

As such Hamlet, the Henrys and the Richards are more real as dramatis personae than as historical characters. It is the reconstructed material that helps us in understanding past themes and thus creating an interest in the sources. Shakespeare's dependence on source material must now be understood in the light of the independent determination to which he subjects what he borrows, not as evidence of an incomplete genius.

In the religious sphere a similar phenomenon can be observed. The Gospel writers borrowed the idea of the Suffering Servant from the Prophet of Second Isaiah and infused it with the influence of the corresponding figure in the New Testament. The result is that, whatever the historical genesis of the phrase, it was made to assume the dimensions of the Easter Passion.

To return to the field of literature for the last time, one example may be cited to show that influence, as in the ethereal analogy, may operate in a hidden though no less real way. A powerful literary figure may leave traces of his influence all over the field without the usual typographical conventions. One such figure is T.S. Eliot. His influence on literary English is enormous, though most of us may not - and need not - be aware of it. But a careful examination of modern prose will show the extent to which his towering shadow has continued to fall over us. By contrast, we might

think of a source being a powerful influence on us from the prominence with which it occurs in our consciousness. Yet on closer attention we would find that it was no such thing. Such is the case with the King James Bible, otherwise known as the Authorized Version. The familiar phrases lifted from it are used merely to embellish an idea. They signal their intrusion on our consciousness by the abrupt manner of their introduction or by the stilted pace we are forced to keep. It is all there for effect. Such phrases are no evidence of influence whatsoever, as school essays strewn with clumps of Shakespeare or Milton prove.

The next and more substantial way in which I propose to apply the distinction of source and influence is to the question of religious transformation and the process of indigenization. The materials I shall be considering come from Christianity and Islam in their interaction with African societies. This should suggest the comparative use to which the theory can be put.

Towards a Comparative View of Religion and Culture in Africa

We possess a rich body of material on the introduction of Islam and Christianity into African societies. Consequently we have valuable details on the origins and adaptation of the two religions in Africa. Such a situation

affords an excellent opportunity to study how Islamic and Christian materials were reassembled in the African setting, and what light this might shed on the notion of source and influence.

It is self-evident that Christianity and Islam in their different ways were transplant religions in Africa. For the most part Africa constituted a congenial host environment for the new communities of Christians and Muslims. The question we have to ask is why these religions were successfully assimilated in Africa. In view of the thousand or so years that Islam has been in Black Africa, it is surprising that the answer to this question of successful assimilation has not been consistent with the indigenous factor. Islam is normally credited with possessing an inherent flexibility which has made it spontaneously appealing, while Christianity for its part is depicted as an imperialist relgion maintained by the forces of alien subjugation. In our terminology such descriptions assume that the two religions constitute the influence under which African communities had to comport themselves. The only difference is that we are supposed to applaud Muslim gains and deplore Christian ones. But the effect is the same: developments in Africa are by virtue of external influence, which propagates the notion that the continent is the arena for the battles of ancient rivalry, with a paternalist attitude towards local culture to boot.

Yet it would be more logical to aver that the transplant varieties of Islam and Christianity depended on the host African environment for whatever indigenous vitality they came to possess. It was the local response that created the all-important stimulus by which the new religions were accommodated. That stimulus determined the local destiny of the two religions.

What is the nature of this stimulus? It is easy to identify. The long tradition of crossing ethnic frontiers and fostering the existence of minority communities without suppressing their distinctive cultures endowed African societies with the institutional capacity to welcome Muslim and Christian agents in their midst. Thus it was that Christians and Muslims and others found themselves surrounded by ready-made channels of contact and interchange.

Some scholars describe these early forms of religious minority life as being in 'quarantine,' meaning by that a form of social isolation that helped to preserve the essential features of the transplant culture. It aptly describes the notion of 'enclavement.' If we transpose that term to the local one of zongo, [Literally, halting place, transition camp] for example, it would become clear that religious 'quarantine' is an indigenous category allowing foreign materials to be accommodated without comprehensive surrender by either side. Thus the paradox of minimal

cross-cultural exchange making for 'quarantine' confirms the Eliot-type influence of the host community. (It is instructive to ponder how increasing Westernization and Islamization of parts of modern Africa have challenged the tradition of pluralism as an obstacle to a unitary society and religious conformity.)

Once this step is taken of foreign religious communities being implanted in African societies, the stage is set for the next most critical phase. This has to do with the attitude of the two religions to the local culture. Let me return to an earlier point about the alleged spontaneity of Islamic conversions and the supposedly helpless hostages of Christian imperialism. Religious rivalry makes such characterizations easy and attractive. But they make us overlook the indigenous factor. It may seem reasonable to enquire into how Christianity or Islam changed Africa, but it is much more consistent and critical to ask what effects Africa had on the two religions. This, I said, is the next most critical phase in the history of religious transformation.

The Vernacular Culture: Source or Influence?

The issue of the vernacular languages is the key to the process of the transformation of Christianity and Islam. It

is also relevant to the question of what effective religious agency is. Previous attempts to answer the question about the changes brought into being by Islam or Christianity assume that the vernacular culture acts only as source, with the active stimulus of the two religions as the determining influence. It also assumes that missionaries and the Arabic heritage of Islam are the effective agents of religious transmission. By changing the question around and inquiring into the leavening effect of Africa on the two religions, we reverse those two assumptions. The vernacular culture is the influence acting upon incoming materials, with local people as the agents of the all-important process of indigenization. It changes Christianity, for example, from being a foreign religion to one with the potential to be locally assimilated. This has radical implications for the role of missionaries in the development of the most crucial cultural resources, namely, the indigenous languages. The notion that the historical transmission of Christianity was to achieve the statistical expansion of the religion, rigidly upheld by Mission Boards, was abandoned on the ground in Africa as missionaries embarked on vernacular translation. The repercussions of their endeavours went far beyond whatever triumphalist theologies motivated their action.

Some levels of Christian missionary propaganda did adopt a rather truculent attitude towards the local culture and the people they came to convert. But everyone concerned

surrendered to the logic that mission was futile and theologically invalid without the vernacular Scriptures, or at any rate without transposing Christian teachings into local categories. The effect was to produce the scientific documentation of local languages, the writing of grammars, primers and dictionaries, and the methodical gethering of ethnographic data.

Again it is easy to impugn missionary motive, but the radical effects of their work is indisputable. The local culture, given access to Christian materials via familiar channels, acquired a written sanction and a broadening of the religious imagination. By adopting the local names for the Supreme Being and the terms for Spirit, sacrifice, salvation, the Sabbath, prophets and other equally significant concepts, Christian missionaries conceded that they had been anticipated and that the standard of religious evaluation was the indigenous language and culture. Missionaries made a much more radical shift in adapting their message to the local context than Africans did in embracing the new religion. In other ways, too, missionaries acquired 'native habits,' with some of them setting out to resist the enroachment of Westernism on indigenous values. Colonial officials, determined to demonstrate the cultural inferiority of the African, found their policies being undermined by missionary efforts. To meet this challenge, some missionaries were co-opted while many others came under

greater restriction. In the religious sphere, African languages were erected into the indispensable structure for the meaningful assimilation of Christianity, with European languages reduced to secondary importance. Notions and cults of the Supreme Being in traditional religions were perpetuated with the availability of fresh Christian materials. Vernacular translation achieved the triumph of local enterprise. The adoption of existing religious terms had the effect of legitimizing the wider environment, including kinship ties and social roles. It was on the basis of such a religious and cultural re-awakening that the seeds of African nationalism were sown, as the Prophet Movements in modern Africa show.

It is true, as I have said, that the motive for embarking on the development of the vernacular languages was often the triumphalist one of statistical gain. Yet no one can deny that the universal effect of accomplishments in this area was the reinforcement of local culture, no less authentic for being unintended. Africans were quick to realize as a consequence that the language of the missionary was a foreign instrument unsuitable for the expression of the religion in their communities. One African leader declared: "With a foreign tongue you can never reveal the real mysteries." (Bengt Sundkler: Zulu Zion and Some Swazi Zionists, Oxford, 1976, p. 88) Some missionaries, brought to a painful realization of their marginal role in the

vernacular adaptation of Christianity, looked to a possible future when Africans would extend recognition to them. One of them wrote about this, conscious that time was against the missionary. "Our aim," he said, "is of course an African National Church with which eventually the [Missionary] Church must merge, with the particular gifts and blessings that have been bestowed upon her. But will we get the time to reach our first goal (of a strong, self-supporting and self-propagating [Missionary] Zulu Church, before the development overtakes us and the Natives' own National Church builds its walls higher and higher, attracting the masses..." (Sundkler, Zulu Zion, p. 250) Such materials suggest that the missionary, having embarked on creating a vernacular Bible, was now left belatedly struggling against the unforeseen consequences of his own action. The wish to retain control over the religion was in profound conflict with its vernacular destiny.

This wish and the notion of Christianity as an imperialist religion may be helpful in examining the history of Mission Boards, Home Committees and their financial and political alliances, but they are woefully inadequate in accounting for the local dimension of the cause. Here the picture is radically different. The vernacular Scriptures began a process which it was not in the power of the missionary to resist. The point may be underscored by the occasional instance of African resistance to missionary

sponsorship of the vernacular languages on the grounds that it prevented local people from acquiring foreign expertise and the rewards that brought with it. But notice the irony of the missionary being cast in the role of oppressor for promoting local languages!

In much of the discussion on missionary imperialism and a foreign Christianity a certain unflattering notion of traditional African culture was propagated, namely, that external forces decided the destiny of the continent by pre-determined standards. Such external influence, it was assumed, came to act on African materials by producing basic alterations in values and behaviour. It is hard to reconcile this with the vernacular projects of mission, an issue that becomes sharpened with the comparative example of Islam.

When we confront Islamized Africa with the same question of indigenization, a wholly different situation arises. In spite of the apparently spontaneous appeal of the religion, Islam takes a radically different view of the vernacular culture. In embracing the religion Africans have had to develop different strategies towards it while ultimately leaving themselves open to the outside influence that an untranslatable Arabic Qur'an implies. Therefore the dogma of the intrinsic untranslatability of the Qur'an poses a serious obstacle to the force of indigenization. The flexible strategies developed towards the religion stem from the

resourcefulness of African societies. To arrogate this principle to Islam is to belittle local enterprise and ignore Islam's doctrinal emphasis. The empirical situation is that Africans have adopted Islam and expressed it in conformity with pre-existing standards of perception and interpretation. Islam, no less than Chritianity, has had to make 'submissive' gestures towards its local hosts. The real difference between the two religions is not so much what their contrasting perception of indigenization is or is not, as in their pattern of accommodating to the local culture. The religious formularies of Christian and Muslim agents did not appear in unmodified forms. Their gains were at a price: the adoption of existing institutions of accommodation implied in enclavement.

The contrasting local images of the two religions tell us more about how Africa moulded them than about how they for their turn changed Africa. This theme can be expounded with striking consistency. By embarking on a vernacular course, Christianity allowed itself to be fundamentally transposed into local categories. The reaction of Muslim representatives to this phenomenon was two-faced. On the one hand the facilities of the zongo were accepted as a welcome opportunity to introduce the religion. On the other hand, the zongo was seen as an obstacle to the religious goal of total political control. It was in the zongos that the Islamic puritan tradition was nurtured. In other words, it

was the African influence of pluralism which enabled Muslims to carve themselves a niche in non-Muslim societies. The result was that Muslims were able to acquire sufficient knowledge of the Arabic heritage of the religion, without any travel exposure in Arab lands, a knowledge they wished to use as a counter-indigenous instrument. The influence represented by the vernacular culture is at first accepted as a point of entry until, with growing awareness of the uncompromising 'foreign' nature of Islam, an anti-African ideology develops to repudiate the legitimacy of earlier gains.

Another way of comparing Christianity and Islam in terms of their attitude to indigenization is to examine their view of revitalizing the local culture. Muslim reformers strove to strip the faith of all local accretions. Their standards of value and their procedures for determining the operation of the religious code were located in foreign sources. It became a matter of pride, with enormous political implications, that local Muslims could identify with non-African values emanating from Middle Eastern sources. Religious revitalization meant for them the adoption of foreign standards and the borrowing of Arab attire and other cultural symbols.

In the contrasting example of African Christianity, religious revitalization meant the search for greater

identity with local culture. Zulu Prophets in South Africa are possessed by the spirit (Umoya) of ancient divination and are appropriately metamorphosed into the gods of their affinity (modimo). They emerge from their seances ornately festooned in skin and feathers in imitation of King Shaka, the great 19th century military hero, and proclaiming their message of salvation. They are deeply devoted to the Bible. At first, however, this devotion is concentrated on the ceremonial and divinatory resources of the Zulu Scriptures: the elaborate ritual garments of Aaron, the luminous proportions of Zion and its temple, and the sacrificial and purification code of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, all of which is saturated with the water of Biblical faith and healing. London, New York, Paris, Stockholm and other Western cities are effectively superceded by the spiritual cities of Jerusalem, Salem, Bethel, Ninevah, Jericho and their counterparts.

It should, of course, be appreciated that African Christian renewal runs the whole gamut, from 'nativistic' and Hebraic movements to iconoclastic ones. But they are all united by the indispensability of the African medium for the religious enterprise. It is this medium which the missionary has done much to restore and strengthen. The anti-African ideology of Muslim militants is in unambiguous contrast to this heritage of missionary labour. It is an intriguing scenario in which to try to resolve exactly what the foreign

identity of the missionary was in the light of the major Muslim agents of religious reform.

Critics who stress the foreign nature of Christianity in contrast to Islam's presumed indigenous potential have to contend with a glaring anomaly in one specific example. In Akan culture, exposed to the West and Christianity since the 15th century, the prominence of certain central cultural institutions, such as traditional religions, marriage and property customs and laws, mortuary ceremonies, music and art and craft is striking. In the contrasting instance of the Hausa, who were introduced to Islam in a sustained way from at least a corresponding epoch, the indigenous heritage is much less intact. The adoption of a militant Islam in the early 19th century had obviously had a profound effect. Nevertheless the process began much earlier. Islamic sources, over a period of centuries, developed into a major influence from the reinvocation of the Arabic prescriptions of the faith. In the Akan case in Ghana Christian sources, long released into the local stream of the vernacular languages, have failed to acquire a corresponding corroding effect on the culture and produce results attributable to the force of influence. It is easy to see how the factor of the vernacular culture acted to inhibit the development of a foreign sanction for Akan religious and social traditions.

We do not need to go outside Hausa materials to

understand how in the pre-jihad period Hausa society must have been extremely complex. People practiced an inclusive understanding of religion. The fluidity of the religious life was not necessarily due to religious ignorance among local people, as the mujahidin ('militant reformers') charged. It grew out of a tradition of pluralism which allowed different spheres of life to co-exist amicably. When Islam first arrived in such a pluralist world it was appropriately 'influenced' and given a niche in the culture. The orthodox motivations of the mujahidin are unquestioned, but if we judge their efforts at wholesale reform as less than a complete success, part of the reason must be the tenacity of local influence which continued to cling to Muslim institutions. More than a century after the fires of reform had consumed the old structures of accommodation, pockets of the older dispensation continued to exist. Furthermore, even in the jihad sector traces of the zongo tradition flourished, with orthodox practice existing alongside patronage of traditional religion. Baba of Karo, a Hausa woman of this century, in her transcribed memoirs, had this to say about the parallelism between Islam and bori, a spirit-possession cult:

> The work of the malams (Muslim scholars) is one thing, the work of bori experts is another, each has his own kind of work and they must not be mixed up. There is the work of malams, of bori, of magicians, of witches; they are all different but at heart everyone loves the spirits. (Mary F. Smith: Baba of Karo, London: Faber & Faber, 1954, p.222)

Such examples of religous parallelism need not be explained as evidence of waning ardour. Even when the mujahidin were busy heaping coals of fire on the heads of their antagonists, the old spirits were roaming free. The Scottish traveller, Hugh Clapperton, went in 1824 to the headquarters of the jihad movement, Sokoto in Hausaland, attracted there no doubt by his own Calvinistic scruples, and met the spiritual heir to the founder of the movement. Clapperton was more than a little disconcerted to encounter the force of the pre-jihad religious tradition. He wrote in his journals:

> I was unluckily taken for a fighi, or teacher, and was pestered, at all hours of the day, to write out prayers by the people...Today my washerwoman positively insisted on being paid with a charm, in writing, that would entice people to buy earthen-ware of her; and no persuasions of mine could either induce her to accept money for her services, or make her believe the request was beyond human power. (E.W. Bovill, ed.: Missions to the Niger, vol. IV: The Bornu Mission 1822-25, London: Hakluyt Society Series II, vol. CXXX, 1966, pp.669-670)

Clearly Islam had not done with making "submissive" gestures towards the influence of its host environment. Clapperton's chagrin was complete when the Sultan himself, Muhammad Bello (d. 1837), disarmed him with a knowledgeable interest in dreams and matters of the occult.

The point to be made from all this evidence is that the

reform Muslim legacy had not fundamentally altered the structures of the older heritage of pluralism. With the benefit of historical hindsight we might say that the mujahidin were shooting at a moving target. The result was an inevitable misalignment between African influence and the Islamic materials being constituted into a counter-influence. In the Christian example, as we have seen, the vernacular Scriptures pointed towards contrasting inevitable congruence.

However, the issue of the vernacular translation is not always a straightforward one. The recognition of its importance by Christian missions sometimes made them err on the side of indecent haste. The result then was a wooden translation that failed to reproduce the dignity and richness of the original. In the Niger Delta of Nigeria, for example, the use of the Ibo language was the established practice in all Christian work in the formative years between the establishment of missions and the second decade of the twentieth century. But there were few workers, and a certain reliance on non-Ibo African agents became inevitable. Their command of Ibo was poor, which they tried to remedy with zeal. The upshot was a pidgin Ibo called Union Ibo. One writer, commenting on the invention of this missionary language, writes thus:

> In parts of Ikwerreland (in the Niger Delta)...the people have their own language which they use in every other concern except in Christian worship. Even in village churches with no foreigner, and in

> fact in private family worship too, the people pray in the foreign Ibo language, because that is what they have been taught to do. In recent years, however, especially since the dawn of a new awareness of ethnic nationalism particularly by the creation of the Rivers State of Nigeria, attempts are made to abolish the use of Union Ibo and to substitute with the ikwerre dialect of Ibo. (Godwin Tasie: Christian Missionary Enterprise in the Niger Delta, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978, p.200n.)

This situation, easy to duplicate, and to caricature, arises because the vernacular culture is accepted as the irreplaceable carriage for Christianity. In the Muslim example no amount of vernacular purity would be enough to quieten the qualms of the mujahidin.

The profile of Union Ibo as an artifical concoction is easily identifiable in other African languages. The Wolof language, spoken in the Republic of Senegal in West Africa, for example, shows extensive traces of contact with French as well as with Arabic. Yet such semantic sources do not add up to the force of influence as far as the grammatical structure of Wolof is concerned. Mandinka, to take another example, the language of the founders of the mediaeval empire of Mali in West Africa, shows evidence of early contact with Portuguese in the era of Christopher Columbus. Arabic linguistic materials also occur widely in the language. (Mansa Musa, the emperor of Mali, went on pilgrimage to Mecca in 1325, passing through Cairo where the learned citizenry commented on his commendable grasp of Arabic though royal protocol obliged him to refuse to use it in his dealings with

the people.) The final linguistic example is the Swahili language. Its proximity to Arabic is well attested, with a growing trickle of English words. However, Swahili is judged by experts to have retained some of the purest forms of the original Bantu language of which it remains a part. In all these examples evidence of foreign source material does not constitute influence in our sense of the term.

The historical study of religion has often focussed on source criticism as a means of establishing the original influence. Thus Quellenkritik assumed an ascendancy in that branch of studies concerned with tracing earlier influences with which scholars might reconstruct the issue of "origins." Thus the Pagan influence on Christian origins, the Judaic influence on Christianity, the Jewish foundations of Islam, the Canaanite traditions in Hebrew religion, the Gnostic stream in the Gospels, and the Roman influence on Christian institutions and similar subjects became of consuming interest to scholars. Through the method of assuming source as evidence of influence an extreme position was adopted whereby influence was inferred from historical antecedent and subordination from similarity. The later material was consequently overthrown. But the older source was not spared either. Each strand of the earlier material was subject to the same stripping and made a carrier of still earlier "influences." It knocked the stuffing out of all of them, too. The net result was an arid methodology. And what use is

Hamlet without the Prince?

The question may be asked about how a major influence arises in the first place and how we might understand the process of the transformation of one culture by another. These are large issues. But at the minimum we might say that if borrowing takes place at all, it is on the basis of an original mutual attraction. Christian missionary concern with the vernacular languages, for example, coalesced with the spirit of local enterprise to produce the requisite atmosphere for effective transmission. Second, depending on the level of such mutual attraction, indigenous criteria act on the incoming materials by domesticating them. The emphasis in African Christianity on certain themes in the Old Testament, for example, stems from their congruity with pre-existing subjects, as we have seen. Thus the adoption of Scriptural categories was not a result of missionary influence, much of which was starkly Pauline in its emphasis on guilt and individualism. The suppression of such missionary concerns by locals is the other aspect of the same phenomenon of the power of indigenous influence. Third, once assimilated, the new material may act both to judge and justify the earlier materials. For example, knowledge of the vernacular Scriptures may lead to a call for a return to the past or a striving for its realization in the present. Some scholars have called this a "retractile" movement demanding "shrinkage" of the cumulative accretions of history. Or,

such knowledge may embolden leaders to call for a radical programme of change. Depending on the success of a representative figure to combine the role of conveyor of new materials and preceptor of old values, a fresh synthesis may develop to which the name influence may apply. It would be the stream in which the merging of new sources and the older materials takes place, with the indigenous environment determining the climate and course of the new development. A major influence may thus arise by a radical confrontation of new forces and the older values. The contact and the ensuing encounter may lead to a new permutation, though the entire process is grounded in indigenous principles of perception.

The study of the primary context of the relationship between source and influence should form a necessary consideration in a comparative science of religion and culture. Given the continuing interaction between different societies and cultures and the emergence of new fields of human experience, the student of religion and society is faced with a major challenge of distinguishing between source and influence in a critical and consistent fashion.

Given the fact that historians accept without quibble the human enterprise as a dynamic process, it should present little difficulty to accept the fact that human experience is similarly set in the context of movement and change. A certain basic openness to new materials is a concomitant of

this process. Borrowing, and the transformation triggered as a consequence, reflects the movements that occur in human experience, and is proof of inner vitality, not decay.

My final observation is best made with the help of a passage from the travels of Sir Richard Burton. In it the reader is given a remarkable example of what African culture can do to foreign cultural materials, including the reluctance to abandon notions of Western forms and ideas of cultural propriety. The pleasing medium of the English of Sir Richard more than compensates for the sense of discomfiture suffered by him and his colleagues. Sir Richard had been on a mission to the King of Dahomey in West Africa between 1861 and 1864. He describes one occasion when he was summoned to meet the King at court:

> The King had repeatedly fixed a day for me to dance before him, and had deferred the operation probably with the delicate motive of allowing me time to prepare myself for so great an event. Now, however, the hour had come. I collected my party in front of the semicircle of caboceers, gave time to the band, and performed a Hindostani <u>pas seul</u>, which elicited violent applause, especially from the King. My companion then danced a Dahoman dance with Governor Mark as fugleman, and his <u>disinvoltura</u> charmed the people. It was then the Reverend's turn to perform. He posted himself opposite the throne, placed upon another stool his instrument, a large flutina or concertina, and having preliminarily explained the 'God-palaver,' bravely intoned his favourite hymns. They were, Matthias (words by the excellent Dr. Watts and singularly out of place in Agbome), Arnold's <u>Job</u>, with a refrain (making 'more' to rhyme with 'endure'), and Martin Luther's 'Old Hundredth" (opening with 'All people that on earth do dwell'). How is it that the Wesleyan mind cannot forego its

> fondness for this Ennian literature? The people stared and chuckled a little...
>
> The Reverend being in his pulpit, so to speak, gave his listeners a good half hour of edification. When the instrument was mute the King proposed a modification. The Reverend was to play and sing, while Mr. Cruikshank and I must dance as before on both sides. It was almost too ridiculous, but we complied...My second pas seul which ended the affair, was greeted with firing guns and presenting arms by all my company...It required some strength of mind to prevent holding oneself a manner of prodigy; the people evidently thought the power of dancing, of using a sword, of learning enough to understand them in a month, of writing down everything seen so as to recall it to their memories, and of sketching objects so that even they could recognize them, to be an avatar of intellect. (Sir Richard Burton: A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966, p. 273).

Burton, like other foreign materials before and after him was required to acquit himself by the standards of local value. In spite of protestations, he obviously had more talent on that score than he suspected, and the people were quick to compliment him. "Our dancing," he writes, "had so excited the multitude that we had hardly dined before an eruption of friends by the score, all wishing to learn 'white man's fashion,' crowded the house..." (p. 274 of same book). The demand to perform came from the value the traditional culture placed on certain skills. The judgement as to the success of the outcome was similarly reserved in the host culture. Finally, the value that continued to be ascribed to dancing would determine and "influence" the attitude to what Burton and his types might bring into the society. Burton was learning what numerous missionaries had discovered, the

transforming power of local tradition on foreign materials.